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Whose Counting?

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The question ‘what counts as feminist theory?’ is an instructive one: first, it suggests to me that some theories and not others count as feminist; second, it suggests that the demarcation of feminist theory as an entity is not a simple act, but one that involves a set of criteria about ‘what is feminism’ as well as ‘what is theory’ that are always in dispute. That is, the question ‘what counts as feminist theory?’ suggests that *somebody is doing the counting*. As I arrive at this question, I have to both laugh and grimace: I can almost see a ghostly image of a woman, upstairs in the dusty attics of our institutions, counting out theories, counting out feminisms. . . . I can almost hear her voice, gleeful and joyous, as she throws out some works, names them as impostors, saying that they don’t count, that they can’t be counted. Am I that woman? Have I been her? Are you her? Have you made such judgements with the ease of the one who is counted, of the one who counts? But enough of my fantasies.

In the first instance, this question invites us to refuse an uncritical relativism, that is, a position which might assume that *anything* can count as feminist theory. At the same time, and in the same gesture, a universalist position which assumes that some things *are* feminist theory, now and always, might be called into question. In a critical horizon whereby relativist and universalist models of feminist theory are no longer possible, we must begin with a complicated and contingent model of the *production* of feminist theory. Feminist theory, that is, is not simply about *any* kind of theoretical work, or only a certain kind of theoretical work: it is produced in particular ways, in different times and places. What gets recognized as feminist theory is hence contingent, that is, it is dependent on specific contexts of articulation (those institutional conditions which include ways of writing and reading, as well as forms of cultural capital).

In other words, we need to ask: where is the work that is recognized as feminist theory (for example, that is taught on core ‘feminist theory’ courses, or that is shelved in bookshops under the thematic of ‘feminist theory’) being produced? How does this work relate to other kinds of feminist work that are not named as feminist theory? How does it relate to work that is named as theory but not as feminist? My suggestion here is that we

need to think about recognition as a matter of institutional politics (and not individualize the issue as a question of preference). Rather than beginning by asking what is the relationship between feminist theory and practice, or between feminist theory and other kinds of theory, we need to ask: how is that relationship itself produced, and how is it an effect of the forms of production, exchange and consumption that are already in place within the institutions we inhabit?

Thinking about 'what counts as feminist theory', then, is a matter of thinking about 'where' rather than 'what' is feminism. But this 'where' does not allow us to resolve the question of counting. To say that theory is produced here or there, is also to point to how theory travels, how it moves around the world. Location is not a fixed point, but a site of struggle: 'where' we are is itself a matter of dispute. We hence could ask: how does the movement of 'feminist theories' between and within various institutional locations involve its transformation? In other words, asking where feminist theory is produced, means a recognition of the complexity of the 'where', and of how texts and knowledges are consumed, or not consumed, in different places.

Of course, in the context of Women's Studies, the question of the relationship between feminist theory and practice has been controversial. There are instances, when a suspicion of theory is expressed along with a highly personalized suspicion of feminists involved in doing work that is named as 'theory' (such feminists are often charged with being ambitious, and of using feminism to advance an individual career path).¹ I want to respond to this anxiety in a way which is responsible: that is, in a way which accounts for the very fact of the anxiety, rather than dismisses it as an illegitimate response to the question of theory. First, there is the issue of the apparent difficulty of feminist theory, both as a result of the use of 'specialist' language and abstract conceptualization. Now, rather than saying feminist theory *is* difficult and abstract, we need to pause here. We could actually say that feminist work that is *recognized* as theory is often more difficult and abstract. One response to this is indeed to be suspicious: the fact that the work that gets recognized as feminist theory tends to be more difficult and abstract, suggests that the demarcation of theory within the academy involves forms of hierarchization, that is, ways of delineating more and less important writing by restricting the audience or 'destination' of certain work. I remember, when I was an undergraduate student, thinking that the people who took the 'theory' courses in my literature department were cleverer! I was not alone in such a judgement: within particular disciplines, 'theory' often does an enormous amount of work as a form of naming: it can suggest more difficult, more advanced, and so on.

To say that the feminist work that gets recognized as feminist theory is often more difficult or abstract is not to criticize such work: it is my belief that feminism, as a political programme as well as a pedagogic one, needs to use different forms of writing in different times and places. Writing is strategic; it has effects. In my view, it is important that feminists enter academic debates which involve the use of difficult words and concepts (feminists need *to effect* these debates, to intervene in them), as it is

important for feminists to translate certain academic debates into terms that are readable to other audiences of women, or to write for other non-feminist and non-academic audiences who have the power to effect social policy (such as by writing reports for government committees), or to write different kinds of texts altogether, such as poetry, fiction or children's literature. All of these forms of writing, as strategies, or ways of affecting the world, are important, and only a few people have the range of skills to do all of them, or even a few of them (it is my belief that we need to re-think the relationship between writing and action, as irreducible to the theory/ practice division).

So our response to the way in which 'theory' functions to delineate better and worse forms of writing within the academy *should not be to stop doing the kind of writing which might be recognizable as 'theory'*. Instead, if our task is to contest the very definition of feminist theory as feminist work which is difficult and abstract, then we need to have a debate (this debate?) about other forms of criteria for deciding what counts as feminist theory (such a debate can occur only if we accept that any resolutions we might make will be partial, and must remain disputable by others who are yet to come). Part of the work that is done by 'feminist theory' may be, then, *the posing of a critical challenge to the criteria that operate within the academy about what constitutes theory per se*. Feminist definitions of theory might emphasize, for example, the intimate relationship between theory and practice, as well as the grounded nature of theoretical work (the fact that theory, like other writing and knowledge, is produced). If theory is produced, as well as being about producing different ways of understanding and interpreting the world, then feminist theorizing might involve recognizing that theory is produced 'outside' the spaces in which it is recognized as being produced within the academy. Feminism, like other forms of critical theorizing, is about disputing those 'theories' which are hegemonic, that is, those theories which are not recognized as theories as they are assumed to be common sense or necessary.² In this sense, we can think of feminist theory as being produced precisely where social norms about gender are contested: whether that contestation takes place in educational settings, in political mobilization or in everyday life and social interaction. Indeed, feminist theorizing may also take place in those spaces in which neither 'feminism' nor 'theory' are recognized as such.

Of course, in some sense, feminist theorizing (I prefer to use the verb 'theorizing' as it makes clear that there is a process involved that does not necessarily lead to an object 'feminist theory') involves more than the local sites of contestation around gender norms. Theorizing involves a set of techniques for moving beyond local sites of resistance, and indeed, of linking the local to other locals, or broader social processes. Theorizing, after all, is something feminists do in order to *explain* why gender norms are so difficult to contest in the first place (though of course, as soon as I say gender norms, I am using a particular theoretical framework which would not be acceptable to all feminists). Again, we can think of theory, as something which is both embodied and embedded in local spaces of inhabitation, and as something that moves: 'Theory by definition is more than a

local act. While it is enmeshed in specific traditions and locales, and while it is marked by the site and condition of its production, its purview is extensive, generalising, comparative' (Clifford and Dhareshwar, 1989: i). The acts of making sense of the local hence involve acts that move beyond the local, though in very different ways.

Indeed, theories move in the same way that the subjects who do theory in their everyday lives move: the movement is not free, and it is affected by the transnational processes that are already in place that restrict some movements and encourage others. Thinking about theorizing as involving movement as well as location is also about recognizing the *differences* between the subjects who might do theory: the acts of theorizing will be different, for example, for Western bourgeois feminist nomadic intellectuals who have the relative freedom to move across the globe, than it would be for women who do not have passports which allow such an ease of movement. Hence, to say that feminist theorizing happens in different local spaces of inhabitation is not to say that it happens in the same way in these different spaces. Thinking about feminist theorizing as the acts produced by subjects who are on the move, but who aren't moving freely, reminds us that feminist theorizing is 'in the world' that it seeks to transform, and is hence implicated in the transnational flow of objects, images and peoples across national borders. Feminist theorizing involves challenging the local through and in relation to the transnational (the question of 'where' feminism is requires that we make links between 'here' and 'there'). Feminist theorizing is about *producing* different ways of dwelling and moving in the world in the very act of explaining its own existence, as a form of contestation, in local spaces (feminist theorizing is not simply important as a way of explaining 'what is', but as a way of re-making 'what is').

How then do we make sense of Teresa de Lauretis's account of the production of feminist theory in the USA in the 1980s, which seems to contain feminist theory to a very particular time and place?

This of course raises the question of what is theory, what is feminist theory. . . . It's a useful question because it takes us back to the seventies, to the history of feminism in this country, to a time when the very term 'feminist theory' did not yet exist, and one's critical work as a feminist had to be done in the manner of the double shift: on the one hand, the work in the movement . . . on the other hand, the work in one's teaching and writing context – what was then called 'feminist criticism' or 'the feminist critique' of theory, of disciplines. . . . It may not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that feminist theory became possible as such (that is, became identifiable as feminist theory rather than a feminist critique of some other theory or object-theory) in a post-colonial mode. (1988: 130–2)

What de Lauretis is suggesting here is not that feminists did not do theoretical work before the 1980s, but that earlier feminist work was not recognized by either feminists or the academy as theory partly because of the institutional conditions in which 'theory' was produced. Part of the project of contesting these conditions is *to name feminism as theoretical*, rather than only as a practice which requires concepts from other theories (such as Marxism, postmodernism, etc.). But de Lauretis is also suggesting that the project of naming feminist work as theoretical only becomes possible

when feminism operates in a postcolonial mode, by which she means, when feminism begins to dispute its own organization around the single category of 'sex' or 'gender'. Here, the question of difference becomes an internal one: there are differences *within* feminism, rather than simply *between* feminism and other kinds of theoretical work. Now I would probably put this differently, precisely because the term 'postcolonial' operates in a very specific way within the academy, as a way of naming a particular style of theoretical work. Not all the challenges made to the use of the category 'women' within feminism operate under the sign 'postcolonial' and, indeed, the problem of making this argument is that it imposes some sort of equivalence on the very different challenges that have been made to this category by feminists.

De Lauretis suggests that feminist work becomes recognizably theoretical when it begins to dispute, not simply the (gendered) norms that are reproduced in everyday life, but the very categories of analysis that have been used by other feminisms, and that have functioned as ways of understanding and interpreting these norms (for example, the category of 'patriarchy', or the 'sex/gender distinction'). What counts as feminist theory, according to de Lauretis, is feminist work that disputes the very terms of other feminist work, and that makes a debate possible, or even necessary, about what counts as feminist work in the first place. In some sense, then, feminist theorizing will always operate in a double register: it will both contest other ways of understanding the world (those theories that are often not seen as theories as they are assumed to be 'common sense'), as it will *contest itself*, as a way of interpreting the world (or of 'making sense' in a way which contests what is 'common').

Now, this notion of feminism as internal or meta-critique might be one of the reasons that some feminists are suspicious of theory. That is, the suspicion of feminist theory might not simply be about its apparent difficulty and abstraction, but about the way in which it is in an apparently internal dialogue with itself, rather than an external dialogue with the world as such. (This time it might be a different woman in the attic, saying, grumbling: 'they simply talk among themselves: they don't count as feminists; *this is just theory*'.) I have a few comments to make about this. First, of course, it is not just feminists within the academy that 'talk among themselves', or that have arguments about their terms of analysis (as arguments about strategy): such arguments, are, of course, an important part of political campaigning. Feminists working in close dialogue with other political movements, particularly Marxist ones, often experience significant problems when the central categories of the campaign are assumed to be indisputable (I still remember my painful encounter with a member of the Socialist Workers, an organization of which I was a member, who tried to argue that rape was a class issue). Indeed, black feminist critiques of white feminism are not simply about disputing the terms of analysis of white feminist theory, but about critiquing the very forms of political organization and work which marginalized black women and their experiences. Of course, to then complicate matters, black feminists, both within and beyond the academy, have disputed the very categories – such as 'black

women' and 'black woman' – that have been produced by their internal critique of white feminism (see Mirza, 1997). Internal critique is a practical and theoretical necessity: it is about doing politics in a way which recognizes that political action involves the use of categories that may be exclusionary, or even violent, when they are not recognized as categories.

Second, the idea that internal critique is a suspension of action needs to be challenged. The internal critiques that any movement makes of itself involve re-thinking *how* to act, as well as *what* we are acting on. Action that is not informed by a double theorizing can be dangerous. Within feminist spaces, we might ask each other: which direction should we take? How should we respond to this? The discussion we have is not about delaying action, but about *accounting for it*: to be accountable, we need to recognize that there are no necessary or 'right' actions. The question of what actions should be taken is always to be decided; it is always dependent on context. Activism, in this way, involves practical theorizing: it is about affecting or transforming the world in a way which is better, even if what we think is better, can never be fully agreed or decided upon.

So this task of thinking and disputing the very categories with which we seek to contest the categories that are dominant in the worlds we inhabit, is also about thinking the complexity of 'where' 'we' are, and what we might seek to become. In this way, paying attention to how feminist theorizing is produced is also about producing collectivity, not as that which is 'behind' the work that we do, but as that which is formed by those very acts of theorizing. That is, practical theorizing is about making links by moving between local spaces of inhabitation in a way which recognizes difference and conflict. It involves finding better ways of speaking and working with each other. What counts as feminist theory might in some sense be a question of what forms of work can enable forms of collectivity which allow us to dispute our terms of analysis in a way which is *for* feminism, or for each other. Perhaps, then, my paranoid image of the lonely feminist who counts in the attic will no longer count.

Notes

1. For an account of some of the turns against theory within Women's Studies please see Evans (1982). Please also see the debate on theory in the 1997 editions of the Women's Studies Network newsletter (UK).
2. Indeed, this is why it is such a tenuous position to be 'against' theory as such (rather than a particular kind of institutional politics around 'doing theory'). Such a position assumes it is possible to produce knowledge (or, say, readings of literary texts) without theory – it hence assumes the possibility of an objective, unmediated account of the world/ text which is not informed by particular assumptions, frameworks and methods. In this sense, all readings and knowledges are theoretical – the issue is whether the theoretical framework has been made explicit or not. However, when cases are made 'against theory' within Women's Studies, it is often really about the institutional politics of doing theory (which is an issue that needs to be addressed by those of us who are happy to call ourselves 'feminist theorists'). We also need to consider that there are different ways

of being 'against theory': to return to my experiences within a traditional English department, academics and students who were against theory, and who protested when 'theory' was made compulsory for undergraduate students, argued that 'theory' interfered with the organic relationship between readers and texts! This example reminds us that there are many different ways of being 'for and against' theory: the issue is not one peculiar to Women's Studies, though it may take a particular form in Women's Studies given the commitment to education as a form of political change.

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